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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

21 February 1961

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Why the Cuban Revolution of 1958 Led to Cuba's
Alignment with the USSR

1. In the world at large there is a widespread disposition to suppose that Fidel Castro's alignment of Cuba with the USSR was forced upon him by hostile actions on the part of the US. It is true that this development was not inevitable when Castro came to power -- conceivably it could have been averted -- but the US actions complained of followed developments within Cuba instead of causing them. A complex of factors is involved:

a. A widespread predisposition in Cuba to regard the US as responsible for the unsatisfactory status quo against which the revolution was directed, because of the role of the US in establishing the existing Cuban policy, through its interventions in 1898 and later, and because of the predominance of US interests

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in the Cuban economy. Related to this was a predisposition to believe that the US was particularly sympathetic toward the detested Batista dictatorship and desirous of maintaining it, or of restoring the fallen regime.

b. The psychotic personality of Fidel Castro himself.

c. Astute exploitation of the opportunity, first by the Cuban Communist Party (the Popular Socialist Party -- PSP), and later by the Soviet Union and its allies.

2. Prior to the overthrow of Batista, the 26th of July Movement was not Communist inspired or directed. It was primarily a middle class movement for liberation from the Batista tyranny. It won peasant support by vague promises of agrarian reform, a commonplace tenet among Latin American liberals. However, no specific program of reform had been worked out. The primary motivation of all concerned was simply to overthrow the Batista regime, after which the political and social order would appropriately be reformed.

3. Some individual Communists had indeed penetrated the movement, particularly in those elements led by Raul Castro and Che Guevara, but the PSP itself (which enjoyed certain privileges

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and immunities under the Batista regime) withheld its support until the victory of the revolution was clearly impending. Fidel Castro, on his part, rejected Communist support when it was finally proffered. Indeed, on coming to power, he acted to break the control of organized labor which the Communists had seized on the collapse of the Batista regime.

4. If the 26th of July Movement was not initially pro-Communist, neither was it essentially anti-American. It made considerable efforts to solicit US sympathy and support, but, when these were not forthcoming, concluded that the US was committed to the preservation of the Batista regime. This conclusion was thought to be confirmed by the manifestly pro-Batista attitude of Ambassador Smith and by the supposed continuance of US military aid to Batista. Actually, the US had undertaken to render such aid to the Cuban Government only as a normal part of the hemisphere defense program and had suspended deliveries early in 1958, when it was finally realized that a real civil war was in progress in Cuba, but this fact was simply not believed by the rebels.

5. Thus Cuban revolutionary opinion was strongly prejudiced against the US when Castro came to power in January 1959. Castro uncuttely believed that the US had tried to prevent his victory,

and he must have realized that any serious reform in Cuba would inevitably impinge upon vested US interests, provoking further US hostility. Still, no sane man undertaking to govern and reform Cuba would have chosen to pick a fight with the US. If, at this point, Castro could have been persuaded that the US accepted his revolution as an accomplished fact and would cooperate with his reform program, a modus vivendi could probably have been arranged and subsequent developments could probably have been averted.

6. What happened next prevented any such development and began the train of events which has led to Cuba's alignment with the USSR. It is not a function of US policy and action, but of Castro's psychotic personality. It is evident, on the testimony of his supporters at the time, that Castro arrived in Havana in a high state of elation amounting to mental illness. He received the adulation of the masses, not only in Havana, but also in Caracas (in person) and elsewhere in Latin America (by report). But from the US he heard only universal condemnation of the summary court-martial and execution of Batista henchmen in the atmosphere of a Roman circus. He became convinced that the US would never understand and accept his revolution, that he could expect only implacable hostility from Washington. This was the conclusion of

his own disordered mind, unrelated to any fact of US policy or action.

7. The US accepted the wholesale expropriation of US private properties in Cuba pursuant to Castro's impulsive re-forms, particularly the agrarian reform initiated in 1959, but correctly insisted upon prompt and adequate compensation for the owners in accordance with international law. This insistence was taken as further evidence of implacable hostility toward the Cuban revolution -- as were certain incendiary flights from Florida, despite US apologies and efforts to stop the practice. By April 1959 Raul Castro had delivered the first public and official diatribe against the US.

8. Revulsion toward the excesses of the Castro dictatorship, at home as well as abroad, had already become apparent by March 1959. Although Castro remained a hero to the peasantry, his original middle class supporters were increasingly disillusioned by his radical and impulsive reform measures and his chaotic administration. Defections from the 26th of July Movement became increasingly frequent. In these circumstances, the Communists became the only dedicated and effective organizers, operators, and supporters upon whom Castro could rely, and Raul Castro and Che Guevara were at hand to influence him toward increasing

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reliance on them. The evident extension of Communist influence throughout the administration stimulate further defections among Castro's original supporters. By midsummer, the figurehead President, Urrutia, had been forced from office for protesting against the Communist trend, and any criticism of communism had been declared to be counterrevolutionary.

9. These developments also alienated many Latin American liberals who had originally sympathized with Castro, including such widely respected reformist leaders as Figueres, Betancourt, and Lleras Camargo. But by now the USSR was ready to come forward to supply Castro's desperate need for outside recognition and support. The Soviet Union undertook to purchase Cuban sugar and Soviet propaganda began to praise the Cuban revolution as an exemplary national liberation movement. There followed in steady progression formal diplomatic relations with Bloc countries, wide-ranging trade and credit agreements, military aid, and a flow of Bloc personnel into Cuba. Finally, the Cuban revolution was accorded the dignity of recognition in Communist dogma as an explicit stage in development toward communism.

10. In May 1960 Castro ordered certain US-owned refineries in Cuba to refine Soviet crude oil and, on their refusal, expropriated them. Until this time, US policy toward Cuba had been

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marked by caution and restraint. The US now deprived Cuba of its privileged position in the US sugar market, not so much in retaliation for the seizure of the refineries as in reaction to the general trend of events. The general economic embargo established in October and the formal break in relations in January similarly mark the end of patience after a long endurance of unwarranted vilification and provocation.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

Sherman Kent

SHERMAN KENT
Chairman

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